

MIKHAIL SERGEEV (Philadelphia, PA, USA)

THESES ON MODERNITY AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH*

The Bahá'í Faith is a modern religious movement that was initiated in nineteenth-century Persia and as such it should be compared not only to traditional religions but also to the ideology of modern societies. Modernity, and more specifically the Enlightenment, marks a watershed in the social evolution of Western civilization whose influence, as it seems, will eventually extend to all of humanity. The Enlightenment thinkers formulated a rationalist worldview that aimed at social reforms on the grounds of human liberty, equality, and justice. Democratic elections, multi-party political system, separation of the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of power, along with the separation of church and state constitute some of the major hallmarks of Enlightenment-type societies.

Traditional religions produced a twofold reaction to the challenge of modernity. It consisted of the orthodox (conservative) and the reformist (liberal) responses to the ideology of the Enlightenment. The first rejects its social teachings in favor of fundamentalism and isolationism; the second embraces its egalitarian spirit while promoting ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

Unlike traditional faiths whose scriptural canons had been formed and sealed long before the advent of modern times, new religious movements have the advantage and even the obligation to respond to modernity in a different way. Every spiritual tradition has a unique point of attraction, and the attraction of modern spirituality must take into account the successes and failures of the project of the Enlightenment. Simple rejection would make those movements reactionary and equate them with a return to the Middle Ages. Simple acceptance would mean that their gods are no smarter than Thomas Jefferson and could offer nothing more worthwhile than he did. Both positions, quite satisfactory for traditional religions, would be self-defeating for new religious movements, and while leading to impressive short-term advances would, in the long run,

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eliminate all chance of successful competition with the traditional, established faiths.

To sum up, the validity and potentials of new religious movements depend on their relation to and evaluation of modernity along with their ability to add some positive revelatory features to the accomplishments of human reason. That is why the comparison between the Bahá'í Faith and modernity is crucial for the evaluation of this religion and its prospective successes on the world stage.

First Thesis: Cycles of Religion

Religion is an organic system and as any organism it develops in quality. It is also a semantic structure, which is based on the interplay between sacred scriptures and sacred tradition whose dynamic correlation provides for the organic growth of the system. Thus, the teachings of the founders of faith represent the nucleus or the seed that potentially contains all of its later modifications. Various interpretations of those teachings produce different confessions and denominations within a religion that correspond to a number of common stages of its evolution. Overall, in the course of its development, religion passes through six such phases, namely, the formative, orthodox, classical, reformist, critical, and post-critical.

Also, in the course of its evolution, religion undergoes two types of crises. The structural crisis of religion poses a challenge to its sacred tradition or system of interpretation and is usually resolved with the appearance of new branches of the same faith that develop their own distinct modes of scriptural understanding. The systemic crisis, in its turn, challenges the very foundations of the religious system by questioning its sacred scriptures. Such a crisis is usually overcome by the birth of new religious movements in the midst of their mother-faiths. After giving rise to new spiritual traditions, old religions continue to thrive in their post-critical phase, often successfully competing with their younger rivals.

Second Thesis: The Project of Modernity

Modernity, as it is expressed in the ideology of the Enlightenment, questions the validity of Christian scriptures and so from the perspective of the theory of religious cycles, represents a systemic crisis of Christianity. Since modernity exerted its influence all over the planet and affected major world religions, it can be characterized as a global crisis of religious consciousness and spirituality.

The rise of secularism and the rapid deterioration of traditional morality are among the most dangerous negative results of modernity. The establishment of democratic political states characterized by the de-

absolutization of power and the rule of law are among the most important positive aspects of modernity.

Third Thesis: Culture vs. Civilization

Culture (from the word “cult”) originates in religion and entails a set of beliefs that operate from within the individual. Civilization consists of rules that regulate the external behavior of individuals in society. Since the inner and the outer are intimately connected, and the external is the expression of the internal, culture and civilization are also interrelated and the first can produce various forms of the second. Christianity, for example, gave rise to a number of civilizations, including Medieval, Renaissance, and modern societies.

From this point of view, it is not completely appropriate to compare modernity to the Bahá'í Faith. Modernity represents a specific type of civilization that developed from Christian cultural roots, while the Bahá'í Faith lays the foundation for its own distinct culture that may evolve into a variety of different civilizations in the future. It's like comparing the blossom of one flower with the root of another.

Bahá'ís believe in the Lesser and Most Great Peace, which entail a similar distinction. The Lesser Peace may eventually come as the culmination of the Enlightenment project, and it will consist of the external political unification of humanity on a global scale. The Most Great Peace represents the ideal goal of the inner spiritualization and unity of humankind, which could involve various socio-political arrangements.

Fourth Thesis: The Bahá'í Extension of Modernity

Bahá'í ideology in many significant ways represents an extension of the modern worldview. Bahá'ís sanctify – by re-affirming them in a different religious context – most of the principles of the Enlightenment, including the freedom of consciousness and expression, the freedom of association, the rule of law, the equality of men and women, the importance of scientific and technological progress, the advancement of human rights, and so on.

Bahá'í teachings also apply the modern concept of limitation of power in the organizational structures of religion. As a result, the Bahá'í Administrative Order is built upon the separation of the activities of interpretation, administration, and worship, and follows democratic electoral practices as well as consultative and majority voting decision-making.

Fifth Thesis: The Bahá'í Departure from Modernity

There are a number of Bahá'í doctrines that are either incompatible with or represent an apparent step backward from the Enlightenment worldview. These are the doctrines of infallibility and the conflation of religion and state, the prohibition of organized dissent and homosexuality, and the ineligibility of women to serve in the Universal House of Justice.

Generally speaking, with respect to those five controversial issues, Bahá'í teachings fall somewhere in between modernity and traditional religions. They are more advanced, say, than the Catholic tradition but are not nearly as liberal as the ideology of the Enlightenment. More specifically, Bahá'í doctrines on infallibility, organized dissent, and the conflation of religion and state aim to sustain the organizational unity of the religion, whose institutions, they propose, will eventually participate in the government activities in the distant future.

Sixth Thesis: Separation of Religion and State

Formally speaking, religion can never be fully separated from the state because both of those institutions serve the same purpose of human education and training in virtue. Religion exercises this function by appealing to heavenly rewards, while the state does so by delivering earthly punishments. Historically, though, the principle of the separation of church and state was formulated and put into practice in order to free religions from state control and thus make them more spiritually advanced and tolerant of each other.

Practically, the separation entails at least two things. First, the state should not legislate on matters of religion, and religious affiliation or lack thereof should not serve as qualification for holding public office. Second, religion, while it can still have a place in public discourse, should not take part in civil legislation. The rapid deterioration of traditional morality has become, perhaps, one of the most significant downsides of the separation of church and state.

The Bahá'í Faith endorses the principle of separation as a necessary prerequisite for the successful dissemination of its teachings. It also embraces some of its most important aspects such as the encouragement of religious tolerance and the rejection of using violence and compulsion to spread religious teachings.

Being itself firmly separated from political affairs – Bahá'ís in the West, for instance, are forbidden from being involved in party politics – the Bahá'í Faith nevertheless envisions the participation of the elected Houses of Justice in state governance in the distant future. In my opinion, such involvement would be best served if accompanied by mutual checks and balances on the part of both religion and state.

In conclusion, although some of the features of the Bahá'í worldview may seem like a step backward from the project of the Enlightenment, a systematic comparison between the two demonstrates the progressive nature of the first over the second. First, Bahá'í doctrines display spiritual depth, which is lacking in the Enlightenment ideology that relies purely on reason and external social reforms. Second, Bahá'í teachings re-affirm most of the Enlightenment principles in a different religious setting thus making them more deeply rooted in the human psyche and consciousness. Third, the Bahá'í ideology takes into consideration the disproportionate development of various nations on the planet by modifying and adjusting some of the Enlightenment principles to better fit the whole of humanity.

Overall the Bahá'í Faith represents a religious tradition that is neither anti-modern nor simply modern or even postmodern, but instead truly post-modern in the sense that it regards the Enlightenment as a ski-jump for its own development that will eventually supersede it. Such a position, with regard to modernity in general and the Enlightenment in particular, gives the Bahá'í Faith a unique attraction and an advantage over both the older and the more recent religious movements – an advantage that, if properly understood and appreciated, would reveal its high long-term potential.

The University of the Arts